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Record Houses

2007

UNStudio

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How to slip a rambling 21st-century dwelling into the narrow bell tower of a 17th-century church by Christopher Wren? Tackling that architectural riddle, nearly as perplexing as the prospect of passing a camel through the eye of a needle, architects Boyarsky Murphy rose to the occasion with a remarkable 11-story “flat,” a soaring folly in central London. This great monolithic spike stands in Record Houses 2007 amid six other featured projects. Though no two houses rose from similar circumstances, an extraordinary challenge generated each one.

On Hawaii’s Big Island, 80-mile-per-hour winds were the driving force behind Cutler Anderson’s Ohana Guest House. Here, a detail—a steel tie anchored to the house’s lava-rock plinth to lace down the roof—engendered the whole, a house formed to weather the trade winds.

Meanwhile, a tight squeeze—a densely forested site—inspired TNA’s Ring House, in Japan. Preserving the trees, TNA inserted among them a tall, delicate building rising from a minimal footprint. With deftly engineered expanses of transparency, the structure was designed as an idyllic perch for viewing woodland growth.

For a weekend home in New York State, UNStudio’s clients, aficionados of Modern architecture, expressed a daunting desire: a new work rivaling anything by Neutra or Schindler. UNStudio responded by reinterpreting the midcentury masters, putting a 21st-century spin (and, literally, a brilliant glow) on that clean-lined aesthetic.

1. UNStudio: VILLA NM
2. TNA: Ring House
3. Randy Brown: Brown House
4. PvE: Casa Poli
5. Cutler Anderson: Ohana Guest House
6. Boyarsky Murphy: Christ Church Tower
7. KieranTimberlake: Loblolly House



Though in most of these cases, client enlightenment helped prime the way for innovation, the owners of the three remaining houses were the architects themselves, who would be living with their experiments.

For Stephen Kieran’s weekend home, in Taylors Island, Maryland, he and his firm, KieranTimberlake, set out to test a construction method using entirely prefabricated elements and components, including cartridges with integral building systems that allowed for assembly of the prototypical Loblolly House in just a few weeks. Siting the building gently like a camouflaged duck blind, the team gave it barklike sheathing that echoes the surrounding loblolly grove and pilotis that evoke tree trunks.

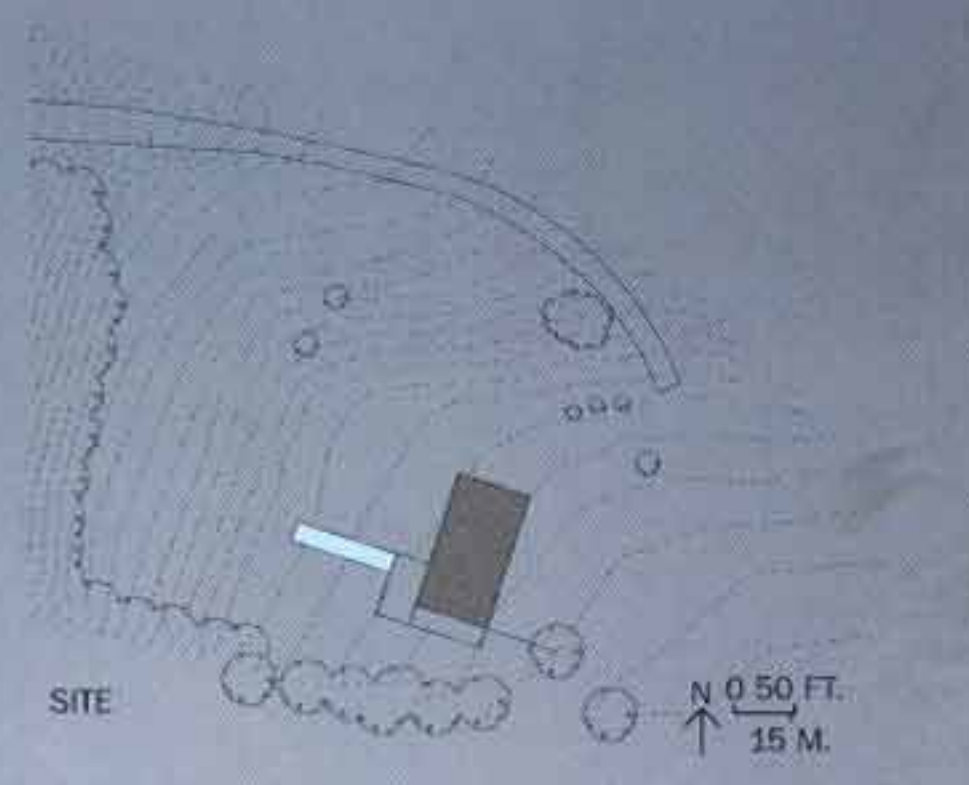
In Omaha, Nebraska, Randy Brown’s house evolved, by design, as an improvisatory collaboration with the architect’s students. Beyond the datum of a traditional program and limited material palette, the project lay wide open to considered invention. Flaunting its process and protesting the Prairie trope’s polite conventions of low horizontality in the landscape, the house, nicknamed LAB-or-a-t-ory, remains an energetic work in progress.

Finally, PvE’s Casa Poli, a concrete cube recalling a great porous rock, appears to have grown from the jagged coastal cliff beneath it. The materials and construction methods not only speak to the site, but also accommodate the skills of local laborers. Doubling as an artists’ retreat, the house frames multiple, often abstract readings of the rugged landscape—offering myriad thought-provoking, but curiously relaxing views.

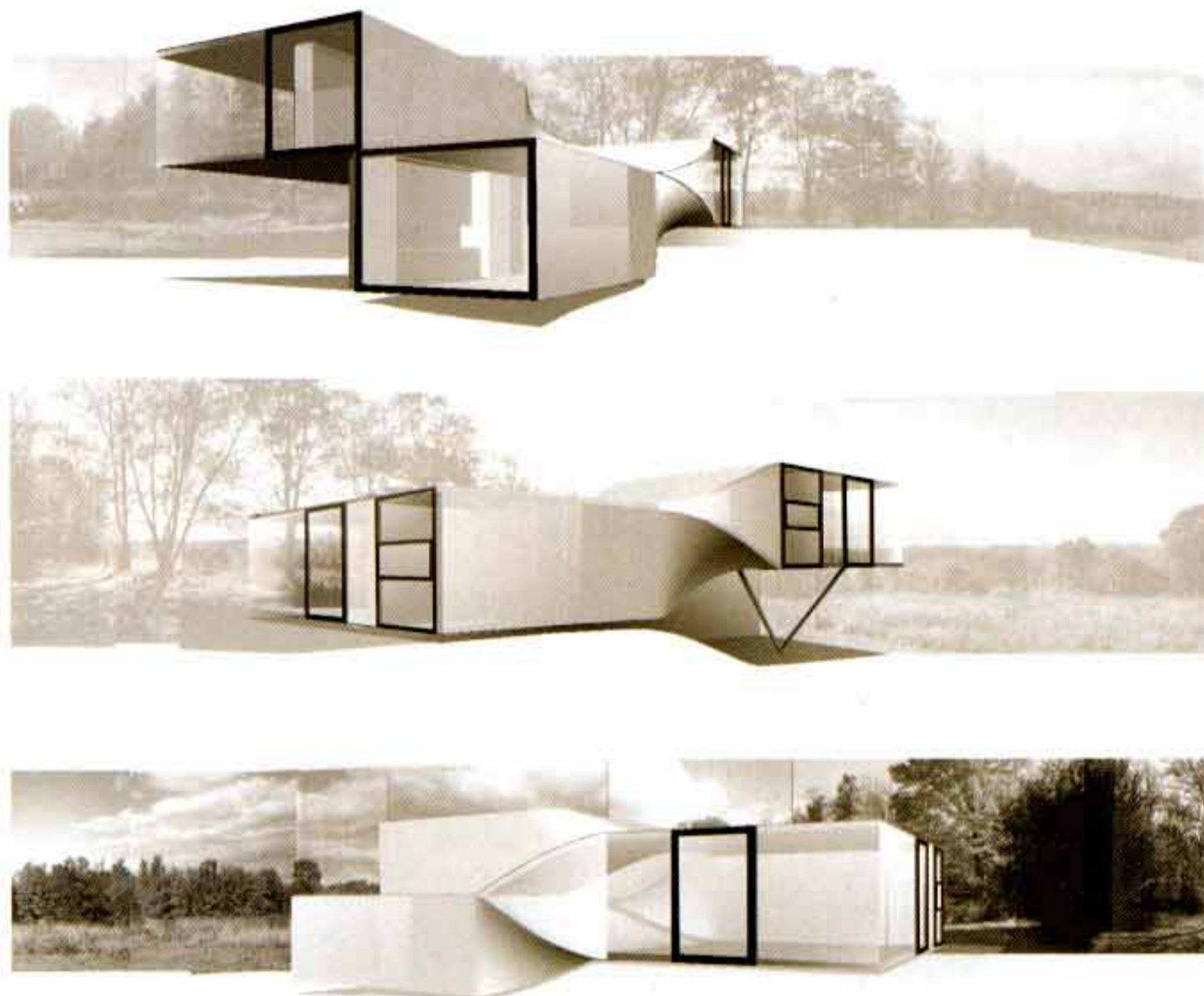
Each of our seven featured houses—imaginative solutions—emerged from idiosyncratic sources of inspiration, with constraints and obstacles as colorful and varied as the venues themselves. *Sarah Amelar*



Sited atop a hill in rural New York State, the house appears to rise over the terrain. A long drive leads to the building's east side and carport. UNStudio inserted a lap pool on the western slope.



Joining rectilinear forms with a twist, **UNStudio's** **VILLA NM**, in upstate New York, captures the landscape in gold reflections



The house morphs into a different form with each elevation, as revealed from its north (top), southeast (middle), and west (bottom) orientations.

By Suzanne Stephens

The client, a New York-based developer with a young family, had a clear goal: a weekend house “as exciting as anything by Neutra and Schindler.” With Villa NM, he got it—in spades. The flat-roofed, taut, planar house in upstate New York, designed by UNStudio, of Amsterdam, both evokes its predecessors and pushes their architectonic qualities into a new realm.

Whereas the Modernist structures of the early-to-mid-20th century emanated from simple rectangles that seemed to float above a grassy lawn or perch on a craggy cliff, something else is going on here. If the south elevation brings to mind Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House (1951) coupled with Philip Johnson’s Glass House (1949), or the stepped massing to the north harks back to Schindler’s Lovell House (1926), then what about that curved middle section? While the original architectural paradigms define the box-on-a-rock category, this villa is a box-on-a-rock-with-a-twist. The singular insertion of what UNStudio principal Ben van Berkel calls a “bloblike moment” causes “a simple shoe-box shape to bifurcate into two separate volumes, one clinging to the northern slope, the other detaching itself from the ground to leave room underneath for a covered parking space.” Not only does the new prototype assume a more complex spatial relationship to the land, it creates quite a different interior environment.

The client and his wife, both aficionados of current design and art, encountered the work of UNStudio, headed by van Berkel and Caroline Bos, at the Museum of Modern Art’s 1999 *Unprivate House* exhibition. There,

the couple (who themselves are very private) were drawn to the display of the firm’s attenuated Möbius House, built in Het Gooi, the Netherlands, in 1998, and inspired by the Möbius strip, the single-surface topological model. As van Berkel recalls, “They were fascinated by the way the design wove together living, working, and sleeping activities in a continuous movement.”

The client found 2 acres on a hilltop that commands spectacular views of rolling pastures and forests with no other houses in sight. Both he and his wife, who are originally from Russia, welcome changing seasons and wanted to watch turning leaves and falling snow while inside the house. The architects happily responded with what they called a “viewfinder dacha”—a 3,600-square-foot villa, which dramatically embraces the surrounding landscape through expansive glass walls.

But more unexpected are the swooping interior spaces forming the core of the house, which you first detect as you approach the front door and carport, tucked under the cantilevered bedroom wing: Here, the exterior wall of the south end lifts up in a gentle curve to meet the soffit above

Project: Villa NM, New York State
Architect: UNStudio—Ben van Berkel, principal; Olaf Gipser, Andrew Benn, Colette Parras, Jacco van Wengarden, Maria Eugenia Diaz, Jan Debelius, Martin Kuitert,

Pablo Rica, Olga Vazquez-Ruano, Wouter de Jonge, team

Engineers: Robert Silman Associates (structural, HVAC)

Landscape: Pouder Design Group



the entrance. Passing through the entry vestibule, you enter the house proper, where a sculptural cooking island in the kitchen leads your eye out through the glass wall toward a pastoral view to the north. But your attention is quickly diverted in the other direction—to the accordion edge of the stair, revealed like a crisply pleated sheet unfurling within cocoonlike white plastered walls. The stairway's contours and splayed treads pull you up to the living room on a level poised 5 feet above the entry. The exuberant spatial effect of this small-scale Baroque circulation device is mesmerizing: You half expect Georges Guétary to pop out and croon "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," as he did so memorably in the 1951 film *An American in Paris*.

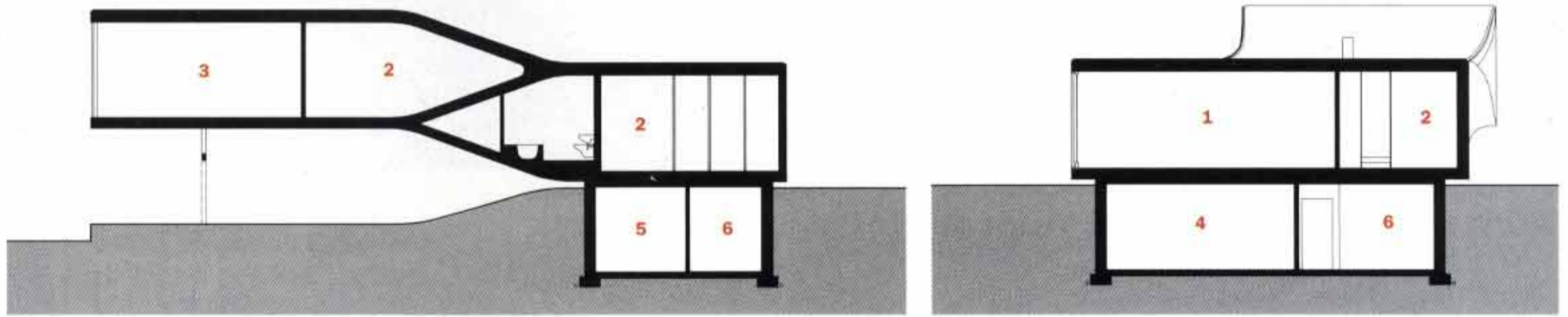
As you ascend to the white living room, your gaze is again propelled out into the landscape through glass expanses to the south and west. A massive fireplace wall, sheathed in a tightly grained Macassar ebony, defines the space to the east (and conceals structural cross bracing). But then you notice that the fluidly sculptural stair behind you has taken a sharp turn to float up to another half level, where it ends in an onyx-paneled bath and adjoining master bedroom.

From this landing, you look down on a twisted vortex of line and space that van Berkel describes as a "kaleidoscopic dynamism, where mobility and materiality come together." If there were a remake of the 1971

Gold-tinted glass dematerializes the house by reflecting trees and sky, as on the south face (above). On the east side

(below), beneath cantilevered bedrooms, the profile of the sprayed-on, earth-brown concrete wall lifts over the entry.





SECTION A-A

0 10 FT.
3 M.

SECTION B-B

- 1. *Living area*
- 2. *Bedroom*
- 3. *Master bedroom*
- 4. *Guest*
- 5. *Mechanical*
- 6. *Bath*

Prefabricated contoured steel panels (section, above) form a clam-shaped bedroom on one level and a bath underneath. The bedroom's profile is expressed on the exterior of the east elevation (below), near the V-shaped columns.



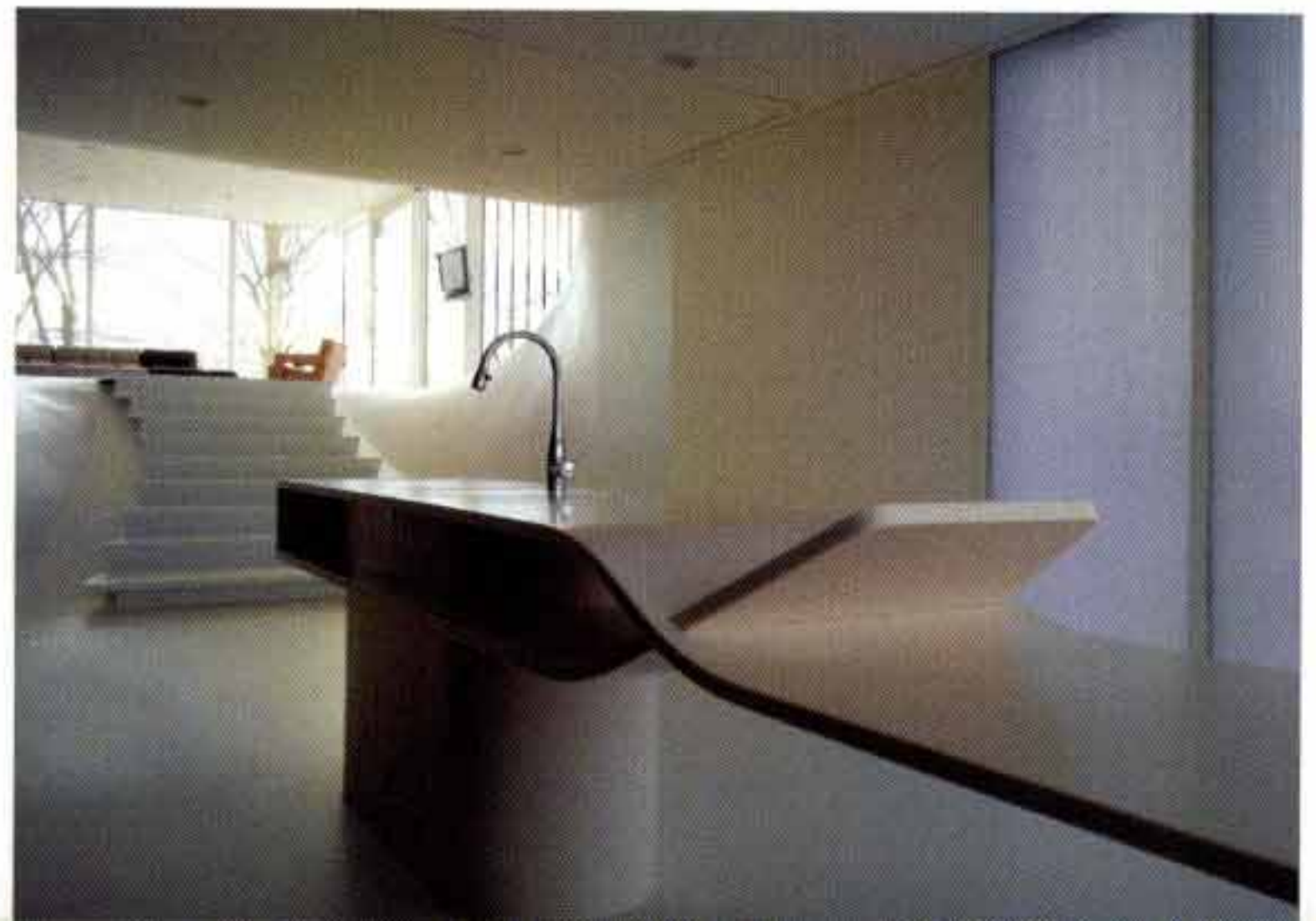


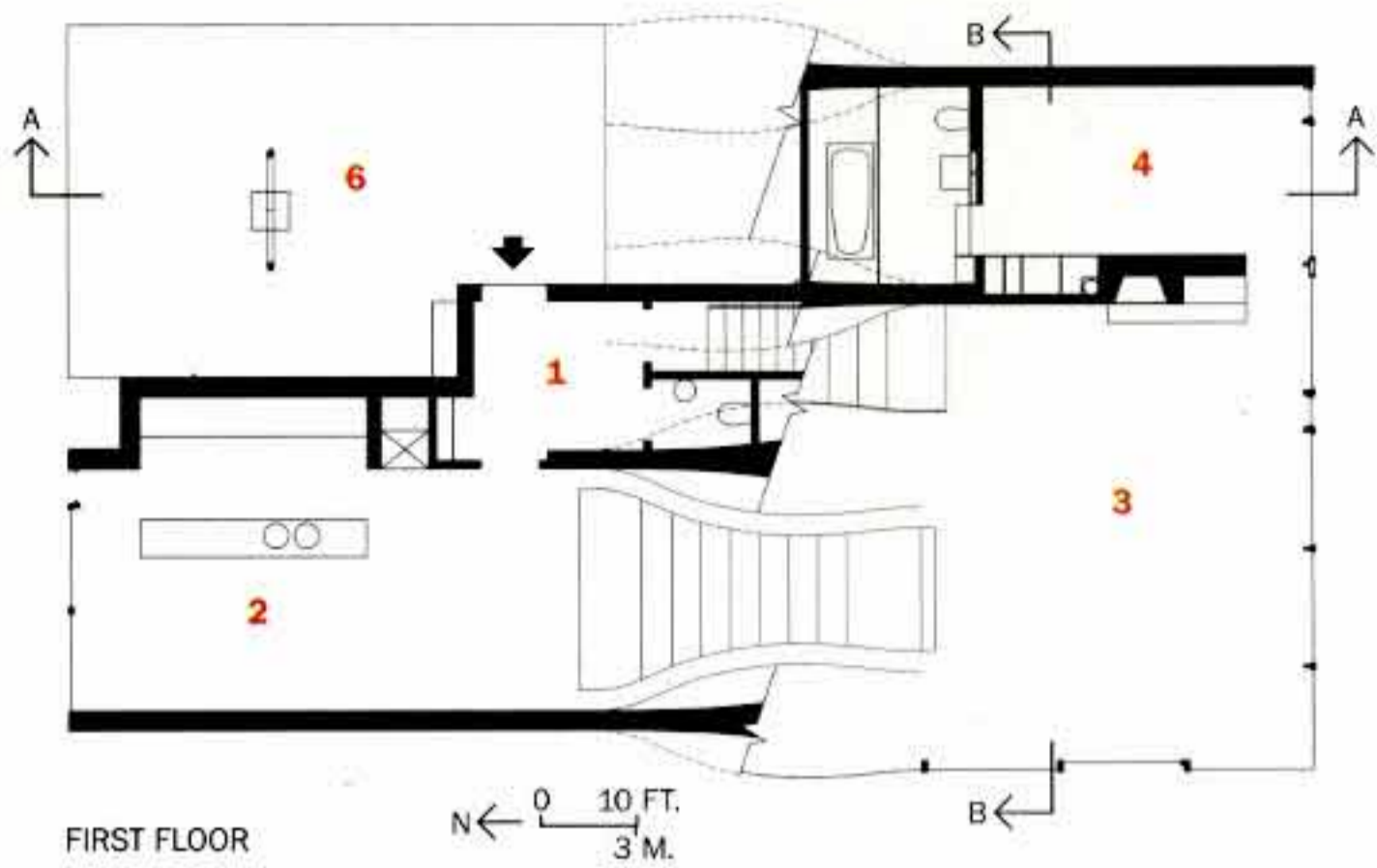
film *Diamonds are Forever*, this stair and living room should be the place where the Amazonian bodyguards cavort with James Bond, rather than John Lautner's Elrod House (1968), which was the setting in the original film.

On the upper level, another *coup de théâtre* awaits, a bedroom for the couples' son that takes the form of a clam shell with a sloping ceiling and floor lined in dark-brown African wenge wood. The bed—not yet installed—will project as a flat plane from the wall and floor. (The girl's bedroom, more conventionally configured, comes with an amoeba-shaped bathroom.)

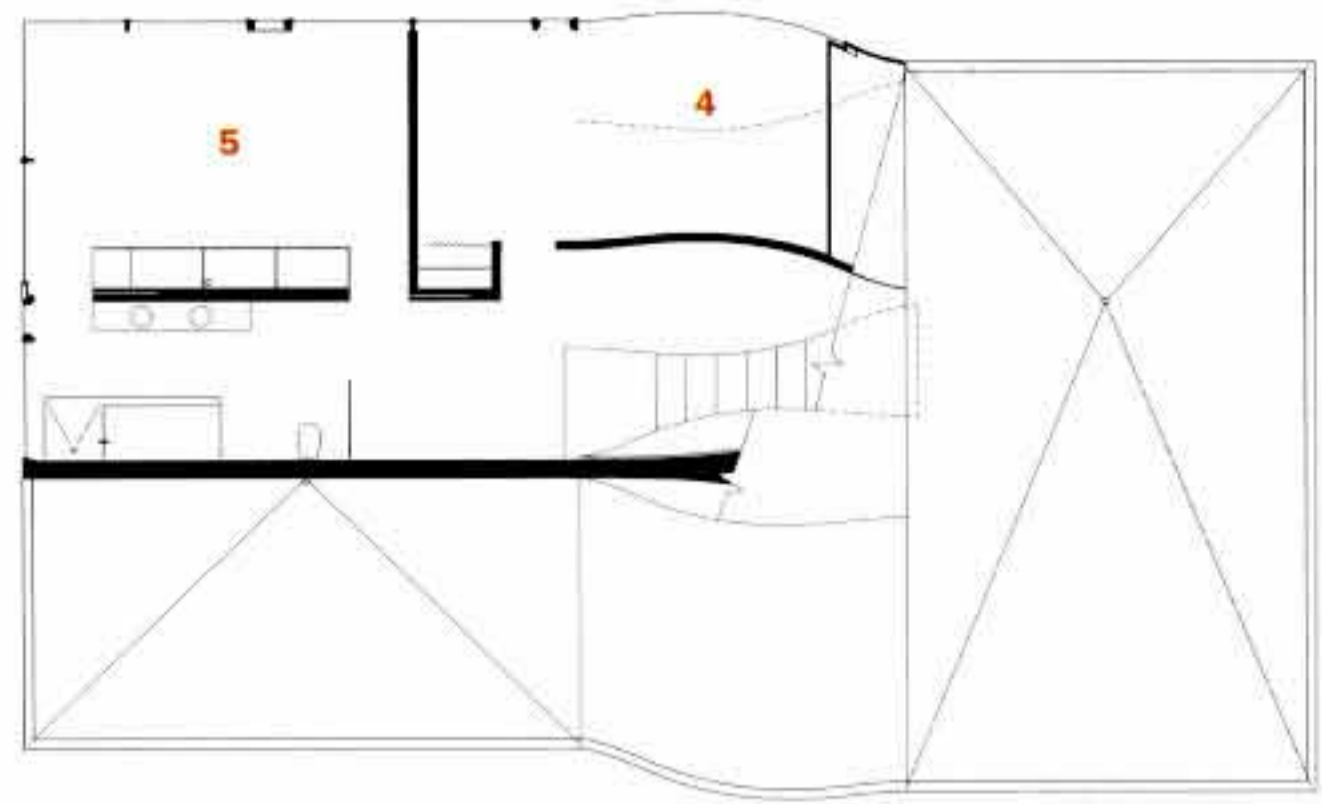
How does a contractor go about building such a structure, especially where twisted and curved surfaces meet planar volumes? "Not easily," anyone familiar with U.S. builders' predilection for orthogonal wood-frame houses would reply. Using computer modeling, van Berkel and his team, which included Robert Silman Associates as the structural engineers, went back and forth with several variations on the parti to come up with a design that could be realized by a local builder. Van Berkel, used to European construction techniques, had figured that much of the house, especially the curvy core elements, would be concrete; the rest, steel. While he and the client found a local builder game enough to take on the job, the methods turned out to be more ordinary: A hybrid structure of steel studs and framing elements along with wood rafters, joists, and studs, plus a

From the entrance level, one can ascend the sculptural stairs to the living room (above) or enter into the kitchen/dining area (below).





FIRST FLOOR

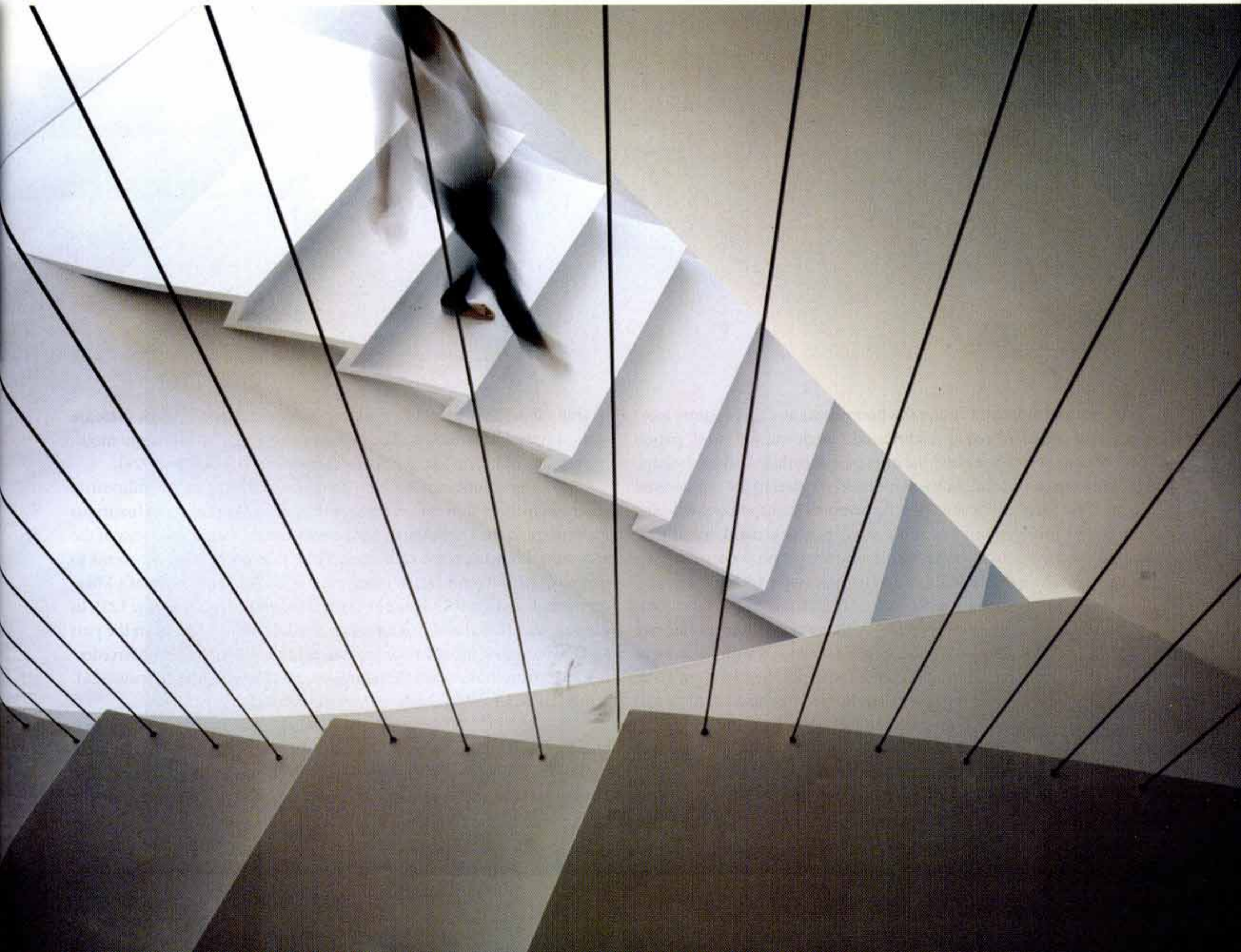


SECOND FLOOR

1. *Entry vestibule*
2. *Kitchen*
3. *Living*
4. *Bedroom*
5. *Master bedroom*
6. *Parking*

UNStudio's Ben van Berkel wanted the "box to meet the blob" (above) in this house, as realized on the exterior. The strongly

sculptural stair, with a sharply pleated profile (below), loops up from the ground floor to the living level and then to the bedroom level.



The voluptuous, plastered stair core twists up to the bedroom level, where the glass-walled master bath opens up to the view.



concrete deck and foundations, give this house its zoomy, 21st-century look.

Five standardized, prefabricated, single-curved steel panels (instead of poured concrete) lend the interior spaces their distinctive shape and helped keep costs down. At the same time, the steel in the cantilevered bedroom floor (partly supported by the carport's V-shaped welded-pipe columns) and the wrapping of the curved panels around metal-pipe columns turned this into a very customized construction process.

As for the exterior walls, concrete is sprayed over the frame and painted a rich, earthy brown, with certain areas filled in by translucent polycarbonate panels. The glass window walls are tinted gold, rather rare in noncommercial buildings. "We wanted the house to pick up the color of the leaves," says van Berkel. "I experimented with different kinds of glass, looking for one that would mirror the landscape," he explains. Although gold reflective glass, which dominated sunbelt skyscrapers in the 1970s, went the way of the leisure suit, it reveals van Berkel's bravado—or his romanticism: "Gold seems also to be most like the sky at dusk."

Where the house differs from so many of its early Modernist predecessors is in the way it doesn't try to meld with the landscape. Instead of hunkering down in the earth *à la* Frank Lloyd Wright, or merging interior and exterior spaces through sliding glass walls and outdoor decks, the living

quarters appear sealed off in a gold-and-brown envelope (though there are vertical operable windows). The house presents itself as an autonomous, high-design object, in the spirit of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1929).

The voluptuous interior, combined with the taut rectilinearity and reflectivity of thin, flat, exterior surfaces; the Miesian use of luxurious materials; and the Corbusian detachment from the landscape speak of the architects' knowing sense of history. Their take on it, however, seems to demonstrate a certain Dutch madness, not unlike Rem Koolhaas's Mies-on-meth design for IIT's Campus Center [RECORD, May 2004, page 122]. In the past, van Berkel and Bos have taken risks, culling ideas from the past and transforming them for the present, as in their double-helix Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany [RECORD, November 2006, page 126], for which Wright's Guggenheim Museum provided the DNA.

At Villa NM, the firm's sophisticated "both/and" approach boldly manifests itself through investigations of the box with the blob, commercial with domestic materials, and high with low cultural allusions. Having an adventuresome client meant UNStudio could catapult the design of the Modern house into the 21st century. ■

For Sources, go to page 148, and Projects at archrecord.construction.com.



The thin vertical lines of the mullions and cables along the accordion-pleated stair and the soft curves of the soffit and floor (right) lend the house its ethereal quality.